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ABSTRACT

Right dislocations are expressions of the following form: (1) "They told the Grand Jury a number of lies, the Nixon men." (2) "We find we have to limit our social schedule, my husband and I." (3) "Mary always wears a frown, the ugly witch." They are found also almost exclusively in the spoken language. This paper examines contextual situations in which the use of right dislocations is appropriate. Some of the basic functions of right dislocations are to: (1) make fully explicit a pronominal reference that the speaker thinks the audience may be unsure of; (2) remove a "heavy" noun phrase from a position in the sentence where it is felt to be awkward; (3) retain the prominence of postposed articles or direct objects in "complex" or phonologically "heavy" structures; and (4) add prominence or emphasis to a noun phrase. (Author/TL)

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RIGHT DISLOCATION

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In spoken, but not written English, one may observe right dislocated structures.

(1) a. They told the Grand Jury a number of lies, the Nixon men.
b. We find we have to limit our social schedule, my husband and I.

(2) Is it so, her claim that you don't love me anymore?

The fact that right dislocations occur almost exclusively in spoken language suggests that the function of such forms is mainly clarificational. In producing written language the speaker has the leisure to exploit other means of clarification stylistically more acceptable than right dislocation.

One basic function served by right dislocation is to make fully explicit a pronominal reference that the speaker, often prompted in mid-sentence by a non-verbal cue from a hearer, suddenly realizes the audience is unsure of. This situation arises when the speaker, through lapse or misunderstanding, misconstrues the referential context of the discourse. Sentence (1a) exemplifies the appendage of a right dislocated noun phrase (the Nixon men) to designate the referent of a pronoun (they); sentence (1b) illustrates the use of right dislocation to complete the specification of the pronoun we.

Another function of right dislocation is to remove a 'heavy' noun phrase from a position in the sentence where it is felt to be awkward. In this way right dislocation functions normally as a

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'backing rule' (Langacker, 1974), similar to the rules of Complex NP Shift, Extraposition and Relative Clause Extraposition. The non-dislocated version of (2) is rather awkward when spoken.

(3) ?Is her claim that you don't love me anymore so?

In certain structures only a pronoun may occupy an NP 'slot.' To utilize such a structure when the pronominal reference is not sufficiently clear, the speaker resorts to right dislocation.

(4) I have loved them all, Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice.
?I have loved Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice all.

The prenominal possessor NP in English occupies a syntactic position that only tolerates pronouns and relatively 'simple' noun phrases. In written language the possessor is often moved to post-nominal position to avoid unacceptable genitive forms such as (5), giving (6) instead.

(5) ?Is that man the little girl who already speaks two-word sentences' father?

(6) Is that man the father of the little girl who already speaks two-word sentences?

In speech there is a tendency to preserve the colloquial prenominal form, even at the expense of right dislocating the possessor to provide an acceptable structure.[1]

(7) Is that her father, the little girl who already speaks two-word sentences?

To place prominence on a post-verbal particle, a speaker may postpose it around the direct object.

(8) Put that gun <u>away</u>!
Throw the cat <u>out</u>!

Analogously, prominence is placed on a direct object by postposing

it over an indirect object.

(9) Show the clerk the bomb!

If the direct object in sentences like (8), or the indirect object in sentences like (9), is 'complex' or phonologically 'heavy,' such structures become awkward.

(10) ?Put that gun that you just test-fired away!
?Show the clerk who's smirking over there in the corner the bomb!

The order of elements, and the concomitant relative prominence of the postposed element, can be preserved without awkwardness by means of right dislocation.

(11) Put {it / 't} away, that gun that you just test-fired!

Show {him / 'm} the bomb, the clerk who's smirking over there in the corner!

In addition, the substitution of a pronoun for a noun phrase in the main sentence contributes to the relative prominence of other fully lexical noun phrases. The further reduction that the pronoun undergoes when contracted enhances this effect.

In a similar way the speaker may elevate the prominence of the predicate of a sentence by reducing the subject NP or object NP to a pronoun and possibly contracting it. The fully lexical verbal element(s) receives prominence thereby.

(12) It's coming, your toast and eggs. (Spoken to an impatient child awaiting breakfast.)
It's just landed, your daddy's plane.
Are they expensive to make, pornos?
I'm gonna kill'm, that sneaky brother of yours.

If a speaker wishes to place contrastive stress on a lengthy noun phrase, he may substitute a pronoun to carry the stress, and right dislocate for referential clarity.

(13) It's hím, the man who's been following me for three weeks.

Finally, one may right dislocate a noun phrase merely to give it the additional prominence that accompanies sentence final elements.

(14) His hair grows so fast, Zachary's (cf. note 1). (Spoken by the mother of Zachary to the father in a context that was referentially clear.)
Won't you come home, Bill Bailey?[2]

Epithetical noun phrases may also be right dislocated to achieve an emphatic effect. Either a fully specified noun phrase anaphor may occur in the main sentence, or, if the speaker judges that referential clarity will be preserved, a pronoun may occur.

(15) Zachary's so cute, the little darling.
I'm gonna kill that brother of yours, the sneaky bastard.
You can't really see 'm, the little motherfu[illegible]ers.

Notes

[1] Two further comments are necessary. The awkwardness of (5) can also be removed by extraposition of the relative clause.

(i) Is that man the little girl's father who already speaks two-word sentences?

Choice of this 'backing rule' instead of right dislocation introduces a potential ambiguity as to what nominal is the head of the relative clause. Based on the principle that, other things being equal, speakers tend to avoid ambiguity, right dislocation is preferred in this case.

Also, observe when a right dislocated possessor NP takes the possessive ending 's. If the NP is 'simple' the 's is obligatory.

(ii) That's his hat, *John/John's.

If the NP is 'complex' (perhaps 'complex' is equivalent to 'contains an underlying S), the 's tends to be absent.

(iii) That's his hat, the man who lives there/*there's.

In some cases it's hard to tell.

(iv) That's his hat, the father of the bride('s).

With prenominal possessors, however, the 's is always present.

(v) That's the man who lives *there/there's hat.
That's the father of the *bride/bride's hat.

Given the functional role of the right dislocated NP as simply providing a referent to a pronoun, the absence of 's in cases like (iii) is explainable. On this basis, however, (ii) lacks a plausible functional explanation. The 's in that case is perhaps 'sympathetic.'

[2] I am aware of, but have nothing substantive to say about the vocative overtones of this sentence.

References

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